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Something Worse Than Iran-Contra

The New York Times
 The Washington Times
 The Wall Street Journal
 The Christian Science Monitor
 New York Daily News
 USA Today
 The Chicago Tribune
L.A. Times Pt. III Pg. 2
 Date *18 OCT. 1987*

For a few weeks now, people have been asking me the same question: Do I think Bob Woodward made up that stuff about getting into CIA Director Bill Casey's hospital room?

In his book "Veil," Woodward says he got into the room and asked Casey if he knew about the diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan *contras*.

Casey nodded "a frail yes," according to Woodward. And when Woodward asked him why he did it, Casey said: "I believed."

Casey's widow says this is hogwash. She says Woodward never got into the room and her husband couldn't speak anyway.

Me, I believe Woodward.

I have never met the guy, but I believe him. Nobody in this business has greater credibility than Bob Woodward. His devotion to careful fact-checking is not only legendary but also is supposed to border on mania.

I have another reason for believing him: If he was going to make it up, he could have made up better stuff than a head nod and two words.

But I do find something tremendously disturbing about his book and the reaction to it. Everybody is talking about the wrong chapter.

Everybody is talking about the Iran-contra mess and not about something far more serious: an act of terrorism by the United States.

Woodward reports that Casey wanted to create a hit squad to kill terrorists before they could strike at Americans.

Casey got President Reagan to sign a presidential finding authorizing such a unit. He assured the President that nobody would ever know about it.

But the plan did not go well. The CIA was slow to train its squad and Casey thought his own agency had turned chicken. So he turned to Saudi Arabia and asked that country to fund the squad.

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Saudi Arabia was delighted. So Casey met with a Saudi prince in the suburbs of Washington and they picked out a perfect target: Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a terrorist connected with the killings of Americans in Beirut, including the bombing of our Marine barracks in 1983.

The Saudis handled the details. Casey gave them, according to Woodward, "effective operation control." And on March 8, 1985, the hit squad went to work.

I have looked up the newspaper articles from the next day. Here is what happened. Here is what a member of the Reagan Cabinet initiated and helped organize:

A car was parked on the narrow, crowded streets of a poor neighborhood in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The car had been loaded with 550 pounds of explosives.

Just as worshipers were arriving at a nearby mosque for evening prayers, the explosives were set off. The blast brought down the front of a three-story apartment building and ignited natural gas cylinders stored underground. Jagged debris went hurtling through the packed streets.

"In one of the apartments they were having a kid's birthday party," a resident told UPI. "They and their mothers were all hurt, some very badly. Just kids. Kids!"

A 15-foot-deep crater was left where the car had been. Eighty people were killed and hundreds were injured.

UPI reported: "The Beirut bombing Friday was the worst act of terrorism in Lebanon since 241 U.S. servicemen and 58 French paratroopers died in twin suicide attacks on their military bases on Oct. 23, 1983, in Beirut."

The target, Fadlallah, escaped without injury by the way. Afterward, Reagan rescinded his finding.

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Woodward writes: "Failure of the March 8, 1985, mission to kill Fadlallah left Casey despondent. The CIA role in training the units put the agency in jeopardy. Even though the Lebanese intelligence service, an organization with close ties to the CIA, had

only the comparatively small role of hiring the men to plant the car bomb, this all tied the CIA too closely to an assassination plot."

Woodward does not say if Casey was "despondent" over the murders of 80 men, women and children.

But I am. I am also shocked and depressed that my country would participate at any level in such a monstrous act.

If the CIA had sent an assassin to shoot the man who killed our Marines, I probably would not have lost sleep over it.

But a car bomb in a crowded residential neighborhood? That's not an assassination. That's a slaughter. That's a guarantee that innocent people will be killed.

So why isn't anybody now talking about it? Why isn't this the part of Woodward's book that is now under discussion?

Could it be that we don't care?

Or could it be that we are too ashamed to face up to it?